

Protests grow in Romania

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The austerity program agreed by the Romanian government led by Prime Minister Emil Boc is meeting with increasing resistance on the part of the Romanian people. Although the country's trade unions have done all that they can to suppress protests and strikes, there is a growing wave of anger against the measures dictated by the International Monetary Fund and European Union.

The latest protests began on March 15. One hundred sixty schools in the Buzau region closed their doors, leaving about 50,000 pupils on leave. The teachers are disgruntled by the massive redundancies, the failure to pay promised wage increases, the reduction of 15,000 jobs this year, insufficient funding planned for education in 2010 and the increased retirement age demanded by the government. On top of failing to receive their promised salary increases, teachers have also faced a 30 percent cut in salary since February of this year.

In 2008, parliament adopted a law to raise teachers' salaries by 50 percent, but the former government rejected the law with two emergency ordinances. These ordinances were declared unconstitutional soon after, but provisions of these original laws were assimilated into another emergency ordinance from last year that blocked wage increases and remained in force until the end of 2009.

As a result of this situation teachers all over the country have started lawsuits against the government, demanding their rights in court. About 45,000 teachers are engaged in suing the Ministry of Education on the issue of wage increases and half of them have already won their cases.

But the government still refuses to pay, arguing that its denial of payment is justified by the lack of funds and the risk of exceeding the budget deficit. The prime minister cautioned that even if the salaries were raised, the benefits would be lost because inflation would soar.

He added: "If public expenditure gets out of control now, we'll compromise our future. Now I must act as the representative of 22 million Romanians. I must think of what is best for all of us."

The protest by the Buzau teachers has found broad support. March 25 was a day of protest all over the country. Protesters gathered in front of town halls, school buildings and in front of the Ministry of Education in the capital city of Bucharest.

For its part, the teachers' trade union has stubbornly refused to back the struggle to claim outstanding wages. This has also been the case for railway workers. When the state railways recently sacked 10,000 workers the trade unions failed to organise any sort of resistance.

Popular anger has also been fuelled by the extra costs now being charged for health care. Many Romanians are no longer able to afford the additional costs for visits to the doctor or hospital. The increasingly precarious economic situation of many Romanians make them think twice before deciding whether to visit the family doctor for a routine check or other medical tests.

The president of the Romanian Doctors College, Prof. Dr. Vasile Astarastoe, argued that the decision to focus on controlling current costs has led to a range of negative consequences for the population's state of health in general and the health of disadvantaged groups of citizens in particular.

At the same time pensioners are continuing their protests. They are demanding free medical treatment, access to treatment facilities, and the maintenance of current retirement ages. At the same time, the national council of the National Federation of Pensioners decided to sue the government for failure to observe Law 250/2007, according to which the value of the pension equals 45 percent of the gross average wage.

Bucharest was also paralysed on April 1 by a

spontaneous strike of the city's 4,500 public transport workers, cancelling the 2.7 million trips made daily by means of surface transport. The primary reasons for the strike were decreasing salaries and the failure of management to pay a seasonal bonus. Protesters demanded retirement at 58 years and 25 percent of their wages as bonuses for Easter, Christmas and New Year. In addition, employees asked for their new wage to be indexed to inflation. They threatened that if their demands are not taken into account, they would resume their protest.

For their part, Boc and other government representatives have made clear that they will not budge from their program of cuts. On the contrary, in the course of the visit to Romania by the head of the IMF, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, both the government and the Romanian president assured their guest that additional budget cuts will be made in order to fulfil the conditions demanded by the IMF.

Such an austerity package excludes any investment in Romania's dilapidated infrastructure. Due to the cuts, Transport Minister Radu Berceanu declared that there would be no new construction of motorways this year—despite the fact that the entire country has only 321 kilometres of motorways.

As the *New York Times* reported recently, analysts fear further “growing social disturbances” in reaction to the government's austerity program and the country's general social decline.



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